

THE third important phase in the development of Wishbone Ash's career coincided with the opening last week-end of their British tour, the band's first here since they went into voluntary exile about two years ago.

This phase, as drummer Steve Upton sees it, will not only see the band return to prominence in the homeland they deserted, but will eventually culminate in Wishbone finally cracking the States, which has, despite their residence there, so far been reluctant to afford them any more than cursory recognition.

There's an air of mild surprise in the Wishbone Ash camp this week, born out of response to the tour here. Leave of absence from album charts and the country created apprehension as to the feasibility of a full-scale tour.

When Wishbone fled the country and severed all ties to reside in Connecticut, few realised that, with the band out of the public eye, their popularity would take an apparent nose-dive and the one-time Great-White Hopes Of British Rock would be pushed well into the background when important bands were talked about. But they were.

And, in the same way, nobody thought that an imminent return to these shores would create much interest among the punters, who, we'd presumed, had forgotten the band's achievements and had moved on to support other bands who'd lifted Wishbone's grounded flag. But it did.

The first Wishbone phase climaxed with the release of the acclaimed third album, "Argus", voted by MM readers as 1972's finest

# Phase 3 for Ash

by Harry Doherty

album.

Wishbone Ash was formed three years previously by drummer Upton and guitarist Ted Turner, who seconded the services of another lead player, Andy Powell and bassist Martin Turner.

Wishbone, unfortunately, failed to consolidate their position, and their fourth album, "4", received only lukewarm praise.

Now we find that Ash went through a rough period, when little went right and much went wrong, when hassles with management and record companies didn't provide the atmosphere necessary to record an album that could be on a par with "Argus".

Touring commitments had put Wishbone under tremendous strain, said Upton, and the eventual result was that co-founder Ted Turner quit the band, to be replaced in time by ex-Home guitarist, Laurie Wisefield. Wisefield's arrival and the decision to move to America marked the start of Phase Two.

"Around '72/'73, we were working heavily in America. We spent so much time over there working that we just got to the point where we weren't thinking anymore. We were just surviving.

"We came back into England and started working on a new record with Ted.

But we weren't thinking creatively at that time. We just wanted to break America."

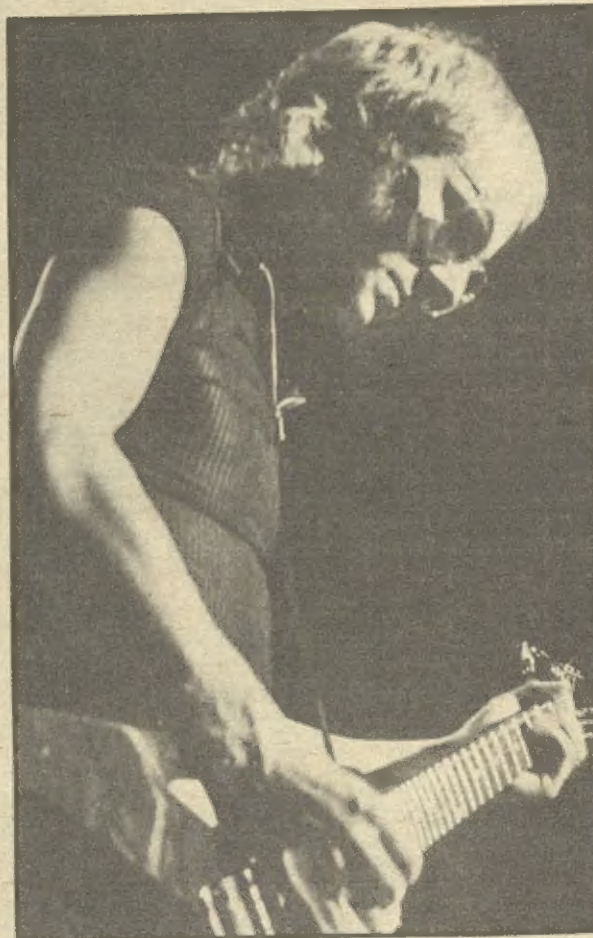
The bulk of the problem lay with management. Wishbone felt that they weren't being handled properly. Not enough care was taken for a band of their stature," Upton commented. The hassles, he felt, were reflected on the album they were about to record, "There's The Rub".

"The last thing we wanted to do then was make a record. We needed some time just to lay back and soak up a new energy, we were that worn out. That was the period when Ted decided that he had had enough and wanted to leave.

"I don't think it was very smart to do an album then. It was probably necessary in some ways, but it didn't leave any room for regeneration."

Because they had been working so hard to break the States, it was considered wise to base Wishbone there until the task was completed. Playing music had become too much of a job for Wishbone and the pleasure of actually gigging had disappeared. Maybe utilising the States as a base would bring that joy back.

Uprooting themselves from Britain, however, was something of a calculated



ANDY POWELL of WISHBONE ASH: after deserting their homeland to live in the States, they're back — but they've not been forgotten . . .

risk. Upton accepts that Wishbone's popularity here went on the wane when they left, but quickly adds that the success of this current tour demonstrates that the move hasn't caused lasting damage.

Album sales dropped and chart appearances, too, were rare when they quit Britannia, but Upton relates this to their circumstances when they recorded "There's The Rub" and "Locked In". In short, those two albums were bums.

"We were rehearsing for 'There's The Rub' when Ted left, and then after playing as a three-piece for a while, Andy asked Laurie Wisefield to join, so we had been together a month as a band and there we were making this next album.

"Laurie injected new life in the band, because, musically, he was very different from Ted. That kept us occupied.

"Then we came to our next album ("Locked In"), which was just after we'd gone to America to live. We'd left our record company, we had no management and we were working on an album with Tom Dowd.

"That was not a particularly healthy time to make a record, and we got to the point where if anybody held out a helping hand we'd just hold on to it.

"That whole time was probably the roughest of the lot. We had no management. Money wasn't reaching us. We just had no solid foundation any more, which was what we'd been building.

"Musically, we were taking a detour with 'Locked In'. I don't think that the album turned out to be Wishbone Ash playing Wishbone Ash music.

"The title is a lot more apt than I thought at the time. We were very locked into a heavy situation. We couldn't move. It was very cramped, not very free, although it was natural, but that was the way we were thinking and that's the way we were led."

Surely, then, after recording two unsuccessful Stateside albums in "There's The Rub" (the track, "F.U.B.B." for "F--- Up Beyond Belief"), crystallises Wishbone's predicament at the time) and "Locked In", the band should have returned to Britain, where they'd scored all their notable releases, and given America up as a failed experiment? Upton didn't agree.

"The one thing that we've always done, and it's very indicative of this band, is that we've always changed in some form. It's never been one producer, one studio, one manager.

"The past couple of years have been a transitional period, and a cleansing period from our bad experiences in some way. We were getting away from a lot of bad things that had happened, but we were at least able to go and get a new thing going. We were starting from scratch again.

"One thing America has done is that it has made us conscious of being a bit freer. All the hang-ups are gone."